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THE PRESENTATION OF CLASSICAL PLAYS

PART II

By D. D. HAINS
Wabash College

The efforts of Chancellor Hall of Washington University, St. Louis, along this line cannot be passed over without a word. While Professor of Greek at Drury, he conceived the idea of giving a recital from some Greek author each year, partly in the original, partly in English. These recitals were not in costume, but were prepared with great care and proved a delight to the invited guests and a benefit to the members of the department. At Drury he gave but one play in costume before a general audience, the *Antigone* in 1897. At Washington University he has given several recitals and two plays in costume with choral music, the *Oedipus* in 1911 and the *Antigone* last year. The recitals are made up of selections from different parts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, from Lucian, from Sophocles, and from Aristophanes. In these, extensive passages are given in Greek, followed by a translation carefully worked out. There are numerous rehearsals in which attention is paid to the technical use of the Greek, to accuracy of pronunciation, to smoothness of sound, and to expression of thought. The more elaborate plays in costume were given only after five or six months of thorough training. Every effort was made to stage a performance which should be correct in all its details and at the same time dignified and impressive.

Colleges for women have not been behindhand in the matter of Greek plays. Smith was the first, and her example was followed shortly after by Vassar, and, in late years, by a number of schools of this type. Of the four plays at Smith the first, the *Electra* of Sophocles in 1889, was the most elaborate, with the possible exception of the *Iphigenia at Aulis*. It was a question whether it was possible for girls to represent men effectively in a play where much depends on the heroic strength of Orestes. The result was far

beyond the hopes of the most sanguine; the part of Orestes and the other masculine rôles were carried so well that the spectator, after the first few moments, when the lighter timbre of the voices was apparent, saw before him only the heroic son of Agamemnon, the ancient attendant of Orestes, and Aegisthus, the betrayer of the home. The *Iphigenia at Aulis*, given on May 22, 1912, is noteworthy for the careful attention paid to the rhythmical reading of the Greek, and for the dances of the chorus. Extracts from a report of the play in the *Classical Journal* cover the ground quite fully:

The presentation of the *Iphigenia at Aulis* by the Greek Club of Smith College marks a distinct advance in the mastery of the art of reproducing the Greek drama for the modern audience. The individual parts were rendered with real feeling and much dramatic skill, and were the more significant from the fact that they represented not the efforts of a professional "trainer" or elocutionist, but the feeling and interpretation of the girls themselves. In the rendering of the dialogue two features were noteworthy, the clearness of enunciation—making it possible to follow the dialogue in the most distant parts of the large auditorium—and the frank yielding of the voice to the rhythmical swing of the iambic trimeters. Few who felt the rhythmical movement of the dialogue of the *Iphigenia* would be willing to go back to the prosaic rendering that has marked some of the reproductions of Greek plays.

It was, however, in the choral parts that the Smith presentation of the *Iphigenia* marked a real advance. Miss Peers, instructor in music in the college, had, in collaboration with members of the classical faculty, composed music which preserved the original rhythm, not only verse by verse, but syllable by syllable. The simplicity of the music and the faithful reproduction of the rhythmical movement of the words at every point put real life into every line. And then to this effective music was added the charm of real Greek dancing; the Smith performance was a revelation of the difference between a choral song merely sung—however well and with however splendid music—and a choral song in which melody of voice is united to rhythm of bodily movement in expressing emotion and interpreting sentiment. The chorus of the *Iphigenia* was in almost constant motion: there was now a gentle swaying of the body, now the graceful movement of body and arms, now a frank and merry dance. A member of the classical faculty writes: "We took as a nucleus that simple line formation and the variations that can be made in it with such simple steps as would keep time to the music. For the adaptation of the steps we depended largely on the girls, who, given the general idea, quickly developed it. We did not dare to call in experts for fear of losing the simple instinctive dancing which we wanted. If you are picking out fifteen girls who must know Greek and be able to sing, at least in simple unison, you cannot insist that they must

all be born dancers, but two or three of them were and they were able to show the others. In the figures the variation of the simple line of dancers was largely in the use of informal, loose groups, but in the main we wanted them to yield themselves to the music even in standing still—as old-fashioned dancers do even when they are supposed to be standing still, say, in a Virginia reel.”

If time would permit, it would be a pleasure to describe the plays at Vassar and at Wellesley, the *Medea* at Bryn Mawr in 1909 in the translation of Gilbert Murray, the *Antigone* at Western Reserve and Elmira, and the *Alcestis* at the Western. Mention, however, must be made of Randolph-Macon College for Women, Virginia, the only college for women in the South which has attempted Greek plays. Since 1909 the Greek department there has put on the *Alcestis*, the *Antigone*, the *Medea*, and the *Oedipus*, making some omissions to shorten the performances but preserving the continuity of the dramatic action. Costumes and scenery were made by the girls and expenses kept at a minimum. The experience at Randolph-Macon has proved conclusively that elaborate and expensive costuming and staging are not necessary for a successful performance. Miss Whiteside, who is in charge of the plays, says of the *Alcestis*:

We gave the play as an experiment in the belief that, even if the audience did not like it, the work of preparation would be beneficial. We were prepared for a large audience, but not for the rapt attention and sincere appreciation with which the whole performance was received. The results are manifest in an increased interest in the study of Greek both in the classroom, where the spoken Greek word has some meaning now, and throughout the college.

A number of innovations were made when the *Oedipus* was produced this year. The white cheesecloth costumes were abandoned and chorus and cast were dressed in colors—a great improvement. The chapel had been used for the earlier plays. The *Oedipus* was given outdoors in front of the Doric portico of one of the school buildings which, with some additional scenery, served as the palace of Oedipus at Thebes, and the improvised seats and orchestra of turf followed the general outline of a Greek theater. The closing scene came just at sunset, when the dying light made all the more effective the darkness that awaited the king for the rest of his life. This play aroused more favorable comment than

any of those that had preceded it and its superiority seems unquestionably due to the outdoor setting.

Performances in secondary schools have not been so numerous as they would have been if the idea were not so widely prevalent that Greek tragedy is too hard for youthful actors to present with any degree of success. This idea is a mistake. The six schools which have dared to make the attempt have been uniformly successful in their efforts. The earliest was at the high school at Gloversville, New York, in 1896. Professor Weller, now head of the Department of Greek and archaeology at Iowa State University, where he has put on the Tauric *Iphigenia* and the *Hippolytus*, was then principal of the high school and gave the *Iphigenia* in his own translation, acting as trainer and stage manager. The costumes were made on the ground. The difficult problem of bringing in the goddess, Athena, at the end of the play was cleverly solved by an arrangement of piano wires, of which he writes: "I do not know that this is strictly correct, but I am willing to bet that Euripides would have used piano wires if he had had them." The closing paragraph of his letter will interest those teachers who have doubts as to the financial success of such a venture. He says: "We presented the play only once and cleared a substantial amount, above rather lavish expenses. My three experiences in putting on Greek plays have convinced me that it is easy enough to make a play go financially. The people are quite curious if the advertising is done cleverly. As for artistic results, nothing could be more satisfactory. People who came out of curiosity went away deeply impressed."

Fourteen years passed before another high school had the courage to try a Greek play. Then the high school at Schenectady, New York, gave a performance of the *Antigone* which was a great success in every way.

Considering the immaturity of the material [says Miss Whipple] the dramatization was remarkably artistic. It was a very fine thing for the school and the performance was wonderfully beautiful and stately. I can say all this without reserve because the whole school "turned to" nobly and worked for its success. We worked on the play for a good part of the school year, studying drama in general and the *Antigone* in particular.

Miss Whipple had charge of the play with the assistance of the teacher of elocution and trained the cast for more than three months, intrusting the chorus to the care of a professional musical director.

Of the three high-school plays given this year I am most familiar with the one at the West High School, Rochester, New York, as Mrs. Ellis, the manager, wrote a number of times in regard to it both before and after the performance. The class of 1913 decided, with some trepidation, to abandon Shakspeare and substitute Euripides. The play chosen was the *Alcestis*, a favorite in late years because of its happy ending. Rehearsals were begun in November for a performance in January. There is no question as to its success, notwithstanding the fear, felt beforehand, that high-school students might not be equal to it. Mrs. Ellis writes:

I never dreamed that it would be so beautiful and impressive, and I would not have believed that the pupils—none of them over nineteen—could get so into the atmosphere of the play. That was what most pleased me, for all of these thirty young persons are now finer, broader, and more sympathetic than they would have been without the experience. Then, too, I was surprised that some of our youngest high-school pupils enjoyed the play. It all proves that the best is none too good for our pupils.

Before passing on to the performances of Latin plays, it will be interesting to look at the record of 1913, which shows clearly the increasing interest in classical drama. There have been three high-school performances, at Rochester, at Cleveland, and at Philadelphia. At Wabash we gave our sixth annual play, the *Medea*, with a preliminary performance at Terre Haute two weeks earlier; Miss Whiteside gave her fourth play at Randolph-Macon, Professor Weller the *Hippolytus* at Iowa, his second play there; Professor Harry the *Frogs* at the University of Cincinnati, also his second play; the *Alcestis* was given by Professor Denison at Swarthmore, another second play; Miss Johnson gave some scenes from the *Antigone* at the Marshall College Carnival, as she gave a part of the *Iphigenia among the Taurians* a year ago; the International Y.M.C.A. College, of Springfield, Massachusetts, gave the *Frogs*; Bradley Polytechnic, Lawrence College, Syracuse University, and the Western College for Women all played the

Alcestis. Please pardon the statistics, but they show a splendid record for a single year.

Taking up now the question of Latin plays we find that no attempt has been made to give the tragedies of Seneca, with the exception of a scene or two at the University of Nebraska. The comedies of Plautus and Terence, however, have been played many times both in Latin and in English.

The first Latin play was probably the *Captivi* at St. Lawrence University, New York. Data in regard to this performance are lacking. The second there, however, the *Mostellaria* in 1897, made quite a "hit." The college magazine speaks of it as follows:

The Latin play is now an accomplished fact. Its success seemed assured from the beginning but the assurance was insignificant beside the real thing. We are but a small college in a small town. Some had thought that the players would be crippled by the lack of facilities. The enterprise of Professor Hardie removed all these difficulties. From the beginning to the end the attention of the audience was held fixed upon the stage. Doubtless there were many whose knowledge of Latin was insufficient for them to follow the plot by that means and their unflagging interest is all the commendation of the acting that is necessary.

The same year as the *Captivi*, and almost on the same day, Professor Walter Miller gave the *Adelphi* at the University of Michigan. The parts were taken by the boys of the class, the girls made the costumes. Professor Miller says: "It was enjoyed immensely by both those who understood Latin and those who did not." Michigan also gave the *Menaechmi* in 1890.

The best known of all the Latin plays is, of course, the *Phormio* at Harvard in 1894. It was staged as magnificently as the Greek plays there and attracted almost as universal attention at the time of its production. The music written for it by Professor Allen has been used at a great number of performances both of the *Phormio* and of other Latin plays since that time. It is as well known in Latin circles as Paine's music to the *Oedipus* or Mendelssohn's to the *Antigone*.

Among the colleges for women Smith has taken the same lead in the Latin drama as in the Greek. The *Adelphi* was given in 1897, the *Trinummus* in 1900, Horace' *Carmen Saeculare* in 1904, the *Rudens* in 1911, and the *Phormio* in 1913. A record for rapid

work in rehearsals was made in the case of the *Phormio*. The parts were committed during the Christmas vacation and the play given after but two weeks of practice. Miss Gragg, who managed the last two plays, urges this method of interesting students in the class work of the course in comedy. A paragraph from her letter is self-explanatory.

No part of the *Phormio* [she writes] was rehearsed more than three times, including the dress rehearsal. Of course, some parts were rough, but there was almost no prompting and the play went with a good deal of dash and spirit. I hope to give a play each year as a part of the course. Students taking part are excused from a certain amount of class work and the object is to visualize what they have learned, not to give a finished dramatic performance. We invite the members of the faculty and all students taking Latin and they are always a most appreciative audience.

The one high school which has presented a Latin comedy *in full* is the Glendale Union High School of Glendale, California. The class of 1912 played the *Phormio* to an audience composed of high-school teachers of Latin and their classes from Los Angeles county and the counties adjoining. It was the third in a series of Latin entertainments: the first was given by the class of 1908, which dramatized the story of the Fall of Troy, and two years later the Dido episode from the *Aeneid* was presented in dramatic form. Conditions in California high schools, where the *Phormio* is read in class, render the production of a Latin play a greater success than it would be with us in the Middle West. Under our conditions and for the audiences which usually attend high-school plays, Greek tragedy, I am convinced, will prove superior to Latin comedy. Comedy, both Latin and Greek, undoubtedly furnishes a pleasant evening's entertainment, but it cannot move an audience as do the tragedies, which have been fully as effective in arousing the emotions of the spectators as Shakspeare. (The question, of course, is a different one in college and university circles.)

In contrast to the large number of Greek plays in 1913, there have been but three Latin comedies, the *Phormio* at Smith, the *Captivi* at Hamilton, and the *Mostellaria* at Huron College. The latter was translated into very modern English of the "campus" variety and was well received. A spectator who had seen many

college entertainments remarked of it as he came away: "This is the best college play I ever saw."

Another fertile field for workers in the classics is that of dramatization from the authors of Greece and Rome. The earliest worker in this field was Miss Mabel Hay Barrows, now Mrs. Mussey, whose *Flight of Aeneas*, a dramatization in Latin from Vergil, and whose *Return of Odysseus*, a dramatization in Greek from the *Odyssey*, were presented a large number of times by colleges, high schools, and clubs in the years 1896 to 1904. Professor Myron Sanford gave a dramatization from Horace at Middlebury in 1898, and one from Cicero, Sallust, and Plutarch under the title, *Temporibus Hominis Arpinatis*, in 1899, 1900, and 1910. Others have dramatized portions of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Theocritus, Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil. The best of these is Professor F. J. Miller's *Dido*, a most excellent piece of work, and one which is especially adapted for school and college use. Professor Miller's metrical translation is dramatic in form and spirit. It plays well, as the success of the performances at some twenty-five different institutions in the last dozen years has proved conclusively. The book contains not only the text with stage directions but also all the necessary music. It can be staged in the most elaborate manner, as it was at the West Division High School, Detroit, where the object was to enlist as many of the Latin pupils as possible, and the cast numbered a hundred and twenty-five. It can also be given in a very simple and inexpensive way, as it was at the Wiley High School, Terre Haute, where the cast, numbering less than two dozen, was taken from the Vergil class; some of the costumes were improvised or borrowed and the rest made by the girls themselves. One of the most effective performances was given at Syracuse University. Played outdoors, with the green of the trees and shrubbery for a background, it made a beautiful spectacle.

A paragraph from Professor Miller's introduction explains his idea in making the dramatization and also the process by which he produced the play from a single episode of the *Aeneid*.

The epic [he says] is a drama on a gigantic scale, its acts are years or centuries; its stage, the world of life, its events, those mighty cycles of activity that leave their deep impress on human history. Homer's epics re-enact the stirring

scenes of the ten years' siege of Troy, and the perilous, long wanderings of Ulysses before he reached his home; Vergil's epic action embraces the fall of Troy and the never-ending struggles of Aeneas and his band of exiles till Troy should rise again in the western world. . . . Such gigantic dramas could be presented on no human stage. But in them all are lesser actions of marked dramatic possibility. . . . In the *Aeneid* alone is found, among the minor parts which make up the epic whole, a dramatic action well-nigh complete—the love story of Aeneas and Dido. The ordinary student of Vergil is too much engrossed with an intensive study of the text, and has too near a view of the poem, to appreciate how fully this story is worked out in detail: how its speech, action, and events all lead to a dramatic climax. There is need only here and there of an interpolated lyric upon some suggested theme, a bit of Vergil's description of action or feeling expressed in the actor's words, an interjected line to relieve the strain of too long speech—all else is Vergil's own, ready to be lifted out of its larger epic setting and portrayed upon the stage.

Mention must be made in this connection of two little Latin plays by Miss Susan Paxson of the Omaha High School, *A Roman School* and *A Roman Wedding*. Since her book came out the plays have been given in scores of schools and colleges, and always with good results. They are both short, the first containing thirteen pages, the second eleven, and the Latin is simple and easily committed to memory. There are all the necessary stage directions and descriptions of costumes, with a couple of suggestive illustrations. Miss Paxson writes that a small charge was made at Omaha the first year to pay for the togas of cheesecloth, which served during a number of years for these plays and for other school entertainments, and that later, when these had grown shabby, a second set was made of sateen. The manual-training boys made the doors, scrolls, and other small articles, while the local stores provided the furniture, which, with a few busts and bas-reliefs from the art department, made up the stage fittings. She adds that only four full rehearsals were necessary, two without costume and two dress rehearsals, but that the individual parts and the cues should be practiced quite often.

These two plays [as Professor Miller says in his introduction to the book] offer a helpful contribution to the solution of the ever-present and the vexing problem which teachers in secondary schools are meeting: How can we make this Latin *interesting* to our pupils? How can we compete with departments which more easily hold the pupil's interest because their subject-matter touches

more nearly the various phases of modern life? It is, indeed, true that any subject taught by a live teacher will interest pupils. But, even where this condition is realized, the need is being felt more and more of something which will vary the deadly monotony incident to the learning of the technique of a language, especially one which makes its appeal largely to the eye alone through the medium of the printed page. It is one of the most encouraging features of our present-day classical work that teachers more and more are inventing ways of vitalizing their teaching without weakening it. For this must always be borne in mind: that we are not seeking to gain mere *interest*. What we want is interest in *Latin*. We want our students to be so interested that they will cheerfully endure all the hardships incident to this study because they have discovered that it is worth while in itself, because it has come to mean something to them, because it actually touches their lives.

[*To be continued*]